

Cognate beginnings to bilingual lexical acquisition

Gonzalo Garcia-Castro¹, Daniela S. Avila-Varela^{1,2}, Ignacio Castillejo³, and Núria Sebastian-Galles¹

¹Universitat Pompeu Fabra

²Universidade de Lisboa

³Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Author note

Gonzalo Garcia-Castro,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8553-4209>

Daniela S. Avila-Varela,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3518-8117>

Ignacio Castillejo,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7445-0416>

Núria Sebastian-Galles,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6938-2498>

Abstract

Recent work on bilingual language acquisition points to cognate words being acquired earlier in age than non-cognates. Cross-language activation has been proposed as a candidate mechanism behind this facilitation effect, but the specific dynamics of lexical Building on accumulator models of language acquisition, we present an account of word acquisition in which the co-activation of cognate translation equivalents increases the rate at which of bilingual children encounter learning instances for words in both languages. We tested these predictions against vocabulary data from 366 Catalan-Spanish bilinguals toddlers. We used Bayesian Explanatory Item Response Models to estimate participants' probability of acquisition of 604 words, conditional to the cognate status and lexical frequency of the word-form, and the age and degree of exposure to each language of the participant. We found a cognateness facilitation effect only in low-frequency words or words from the language of lower exposure. Overall, our findings support an interactive account of bilingual vocabulary acquisition in which the lexical representations in one language interact with the acquisition of words in the other language.

Keywords—lexical acquisition, vocabulary, bilingualism, item response theory, bayesian

Cognate beginnings to bilingual lexical acquisition

The foundations of word learning are in place early in age. From six months of age, infants start directing their gaze to some objects when hearing their labels, according to experimental data (Bergelson & Swingle, 2012, 2015; Tincoff & Jusczyk, 1999). Shortly after, caregivers start reporting some words as acquired by their infant in vocabulary checklists (e.g., Fenson et al., 2007; Samuelson, 2021). Most research on early word acquisition relies extensively on data from monolingual children and is oblivious to the fact that a substantial proportion of the world population acquires more than one language from early ages (Grosjean, 2021). Previous work on bilingual vocabulary acquisition pointed to bilingual toddlers knowing, on average, less words in each of their languages than their monolinguals peers, and to both groups knowing a similar amount of words, if not more words, when the bilinguals' two languages are pooled together. Hoff et al. (2012) found that English-Spanish bilingual toddlers in South Florida (United States) knew less words in English than monolinguals did. Both groups knew a similar total amount of words when both English and Spanish vocabularies were counted together. Other studies have provided converging evidence that bilinguals know a similar or even larger number of words than monolinguals when the two languages are aggregated (Gonzalez-Barrero et al., 2020; Oller & Eilers, 2002; Patterson, 2004; Patterson & Pearson, 2004; Pearson & Fernández, 1994; Pearson et al., 1993; Petitto et al., 2001; Smithson et al., 2014). A more detailed analysis of the words in bilinguals' lexicon show some interesting patterns.

One important observation of studies on bilinguals' early vocabulary acquisition is that cognate words are easier to acquire than non-cognate words. Cognate words are translation equivalents that are phonologically similar (or share some type of form-similarity). For instance, the Spanish translation equivalent of cat is gato, a cognate word; the translation equivalent of dog is perro, a non-cognate word. The differences in the percentages of cognate and non-cognate words between two languages is related to historic reasons: languages typologically close (like Dutch and English or Italian and Spanish) share more cognates than languages typologically distant (like English and Chinese, or Urdu and Spanish). The conclusion that cognate words are easier to learn is based on two types of evidence: studies investigating vocabulary sizes in children learning language pairs with different percentages

of cognates (that is, differing in their typological distance) and studies comparing the number of cognate and non-cognate words children know in a specific language pair.

Floccia et al. (2018) published an impressive study comparing vocabularies of children learning several language pairs differing in their percentage of cognates. The authors collected vocabulary data on word comprehension and production from 372 24-month-old bilingual toddlers living in the United Kingdom who were learning English and an additional language. The additional language was one of 13 typologically diverse languages: Bengali, Cantonese Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hindi/Urdu, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and Welsh. The authors calculated the average phonological overlap between the words in each of these additional languages and their translation equivalents in English, which was taken as a proxy of the degree of cognateness between each pair of languages. Floccia and co-workers reported an increase in vocabulary size in the additional language (i.e., not English) associated with an increase in the average phonological similarity between the translation equivalents of each language pair. For example, English-Dutch bilinguals (languages with a high phonological overlap), were able to produce more Dutch words than English-Mandarin bilinguals (languages with a low phonological overlap) were able to produce in Mandarin. Blom et al. (2020), Bosma et al. (2019), and Gampe et al. (2021) reported similar results, providing converging evidence of a facilitatory effect of language distance on vocabulary size.

A second set of studies concluded that cognates are overrepresented in bilinguals' early lexicon. Bosch and Ramon-Casas (2014) collected parental reports of expressive vocabulary from 48 Catalan-Spanish bilinguals aged 18 months and found that cognates represented a larger proportion of participant's vocabulary than non-cognates. Schelletter (2002) provided converging evidence from a longitudinal single-case study, in which an English-German bilingual produced cognates earlier than non-cognates, on average. Mitchell et al. (2022) addressed this issue in a larger sample longitudinal study. These authors collected expressive vocabulary data of 47 16- to 30-month-old French-English bilinguals living in Canada, in both languages. They created two lists of translation equivalents: one made of 131 cognates, and one made of 406 non-cognates. The proportion of words that children were reportedly able to produce was higher in the cognate lists than in the non-cognate list across ages, even

when both lists were matched by semantic category (furniture, animals, food were similarity represented in both lists) and age-of-acquisition norms (an index of word difficulty). Taken together, the results of these two lines of research provide a strong support to the hypothesis that phonological similarity (as reflected in cognateness) plays a facilitation role in bilingual word acquisition.

Parallel activation of bilinguals' lexicons has been proposed as the underlying mechanism for such facilitatory effect (e.g., Floccia et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2022). The parallel activation hypothesis stems from the language non-selective account of lexical access, which suggests that bilinguals activate both languages simultaneously during language processing, even in fully monolingual environments. Evidence supporting the language-non selective account of lexical access has been reported for language comprehension and production, across the auditory and visual (reading and signing) modalities (Gimeno-Martínez et al., 2021; Hoshino & Kroll, 2008; Morford et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2007; Spivey & Marian, 1999; van Hell & de Groot, 2008; see Kroll & Ma, 2017, for review). One of the clearest pieces of evidence of parallel activation was provided by Costa et al. (2000). In this study, Spanish monolinguals and Catalan-Spanish bilingual adults were asked to name pictures of common objects in Spanish. In half of the trials, the object labels were cognates in Spanish and Catalan (árbol-arbre, translations of tree), whereas in the other half of the trial labels were non-cognates (mesa-taula, translations of table), obviously, such distinction was only relevant for bilinguals. Bilinguals named cognate pictures faster than non-cognate pictures, even after adjusting for the lexical frequency of the items. In contrast, Spanish monolinguals, who were unfamiliar with the Catalan translations of the Spanish words they uttered, showed equivalent naming times for the two types of stimuli. The authors interpreted the difference between cognates and non-cognates in bilinguals as reflecting the additional phonological activation that cognate words would receive from their translation equivalents (due to language non-selective activation of bilinguals' lexicons). These results showed that bilinguals' Catalan phonology was activated during the production of Spanish words, facilitating the naming of cognate pictures. Evidence of parallel activation has been reported in bilingual toddlers and children (Bosma & Nota, 2020; Poarch & van Hell, 2012; Poulin-Dubois et al., 2013; Schröter & Schroeder, 2016; Von Holzen & Mani, 2012; Von Holzen et al., 2019).

Although there is converging evidence on the role of parallel activation, the previous studies do not address its influence on the learning trajectories of words. Results are aggregated across words, and provide no information about the specific dynamics of how parallel activation influences word learning. This is the goal of the present research.

We propose an account in which a learning instance for a word may also represent a learning instance for its translation equivalent, only if such translation equivalent is co-activated. The probability of this co-activation is proportional to the phonological similarity between the two translation equivalents, and given that cognates share higher phonological similarity than non-cognates, the former may be co-activated more frequently than the latter. This should lead to a faster accumulation of learning instances for cognates, compared to non-cognates. Parallel activation would allow bilingual children to accumulate learning instances for words in both languages even during fully monolingual situations, but the impact of this mechanism would be asymmetric across both languages: words from the lower-exposure language would receive additional learning instances through parallel activation more often than words from the higher-exposure language. Therefore, the acquisition of words from the lower-exposure language would benefit more strongly from their cognate status than words from the higher-exposure language.

Consider the example of the Catalan-Spanish cognate translation equivalent /'gat-'ga.to/ [cat], that are phonologically very similar. When the child is exposed to /'gat/, they will strongly co-activate /'ga.to/ in parallel. Therefore, this exposure will count as a learning instance for both co-activated forms. However, for the case of the non-cognate translation equivalent /'gos/, the low phonological similarity will result in a weak activation of /'pe.ro/ resulting in such exposure counting as a learning instance for /'gos/ (which the child was exposed to), but not for /'pe.ro/. While /'gat-'ga.to/ will benefit from parallel activation, /'gos-'pe.ro/ will not. If the child receives linguistic input from one of the languages more often than from the other, this effect might affect each form of the cognate translation equivalent differently. For instance, if the child receives a larger amount of Catalan input than Spanish input, they will encounter the Catalan form /'gat/ more frequently than the Spanish form /'ga.to/. Through parallel activation, /'gat/ will activate /'ga.to/ more often than vice versa. Ultimately, /'ga.to/ will benefit more strongly from its cognate status than

/ˈgat/, as it receives additional learning instances from its translation equivalent more often than /ˈgat/.

To test these predictions, we collected vocabulary data on production and comprehension from a large sample of bilingual Catalan-Spanish children using an online vocabulary checklist designed for the present study. We adopted a Bayesian explanatory item response theory approach (IRT, see Kachergis et al. (2022), for a similar approach) to model the probability of acquisition of 604 Catalan and Spanish nouns included in the vocabulary checklist. Words were considered as acquired if caregivers reported such word to be understood (comprehension) or understood and said (production) by their child. We estimated the impact of several predictors of interest on the probability of acquisition. We included participants' age and rate of exposure to the word-form, and the cognate status of the word-form. As described in the methods section, rate of exposure was a composite measure taking into account participant' language exposure and word's lexical frequency). We predicted an interaction between cognate status and word exposure rate in which the probability of comprehension is higher for low-exposure cognate words, but not for high-exposure words cognate words.

Methods

All materials, data, and reproducible code can be found at the OSF (<https://osf.io/hy984/>) and GitHub (<https://github.com/gongcastro/cognate-beginnings>) repositories. This study was conducted according to guidelines laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki, and was approved by the Drug Research Ethical Committee (CEIm) of the IMIM Parc de Salut Mar, reference 2020/9080/I.

Questionnaire

To collect vocabulary data from participants, we created an *ad hoc* questionnaire: the Barcelona Vocabulary Questionnaire (Garcia-Castro et al., 2023). This questionnaire was inspired by the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory (Fenson et al., 2007) and its adaptations to other languages, and was implemented on-line using the formr platform (Arslan et al., 2020). This questionnaire is structured in three blocks: (1) a language exposure questionnaire, (2) a demographic survey, and (3) two vocabulary checklists. Vocab-

ulary checklists followed a similar structure as the Oxford Communicative Developmental Inventory (Hamilton et al., 2000) and consisted in two lists of words: one in Catalan and one in Spanish. both lists included items from a diverse sample of 26 semantic/functional categories. The Catalan checklist contained 793 items and the Spanish checklist contained 797. Items in one language were translation equivalents of the items in the other language, roughly following a one-to-one mapping (e.g., the same participant responded to both *gos* and *perro*, Catalan and Spanish for ‘dog’) (see Table 1 for a summary of the questionnaire items).

Table 1: Summary of the items included in the final analyses.

| | List A | List B | List C | List D | Total | Examples |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|----------------------------|
| Household items | 31 | 26 | 30 | 25 | 112 | bottle, bed |
| Food and drink | 29 | 26 | 23 | 27 | 105 | water (beverage), sandwich |
| Animals | 26 | 23 | 19 | 25 | 93 | bee, owl |
| Outside | 14 | 13 | 13 | 15 | 55 | tree, ground |
| Body parts | 14 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 48 | tummy, mouth |
| Toys | 11 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 47 | box, balloon |
| Clothes | 12 | 12 | 10 | 10 | 44 | bib, button |
| Vehicles | 9 | 10 | 11 | 10 | 40 | airplane, boat |
| Colours | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 24 | yellow, blue |
| People | 7 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 23 | child, grandma |
| Furniture and rooms | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 16 | bath, kitchen |
| Time | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 | day, night |
| Adventures | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | witch |
| Parts of things | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | wheel |

For each word included in the vocabulary checklists, we asked parents to report whether their child was able to understand it, understand *and* say it, or did not understand or say it (checked out by default). Given the large number of words in the vocabulary checklists, we created four different subsets of the complete list of items. Each subset

contained a random but representative sub-sample of the items from the complete list. Semantic/functional categories with less than 16 items—thus resulting in less than four items after dividing it in four lists—were not divided in the short version of the questionnaire: all of their items were included in the four lists. Items that were part of the trial lists of some ongoing experiments in the lab were also included in all versions. The resulting reduced vocabulary checklists contained between 343 and 349 Catalan words, and between 349 and 371 Spanish words. Participants were randomly allocated into one of the four subsets. Each response to the questionnaire provided data for a minimum of 343 and a maximum of 371 translation equivalents.

For each word included in the questionnaire, we manually generated a broad phonological transcription in X-SAMPA format. Catalan word-forms were transcribed to Central Catalan phonology, and Spanish word-forms were transcribed to Castilian Spanish phonology. For each translation equivalent, we calculated the phonological similarity between the Catalan and the Spanish word-form using the same Levenshtein similarity measure used in Floccia et al. (2018).

Participants

We collected 436 responses to the questionnaire from 366 distinct children from the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona between the 30th of marzo, 2020 and the 31th of octubre, 2022: 312 of those participants participated once, 42 twice, 8 three times, and 4 four times. Recurrent participants provided responses with a minimum of 25 days between responses, and a maximum of 527, and were always allocated to the same questionnaire list (A, B, C, or D). Participants were part of the database of the Laboratori de Recerca en Infància (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), and were contacted by e-mail or phone if their child was aged between 12 and 32 months, and had not been reported to be exposed more than 10% of the time to a language other than Spanish or Catalan (see Table 2) for a more detailed description of the sample). In total, 70 participants (16.06%) participants were reported to be exposed to a third language other than Catalan and Spanish. All families provided informed consent before participating. Upon consent, families were sent a link to the questionnaire via e-mail, which they filled from a computer, laptop, or mobile device. Filling the questionnaire

took 30 minutes approximately. After completion, families were rewarded with a token of appreciation.

Table 2: Participant sample size by age and degree of exposure to Catalan.

| Catalan exposure | Age (months) | | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | [10,14] | (14,18] | (18,22] | (22,26] | (26,30] | (30,34] |
| 75-100% | 18 | 23 | 36 | 38 | 20 | 7 |
| 50-75% | 8 | 13 | 30 | 41 | 18 | 1 |
| 25-50% | 10 | 17 | 45 | 29 | 17 | – |
| 0-25% | 7 | 11 | 21 | 17 | 8 | 1 |

We used the highest self-reported educational attainment of parents or caregivers as a proxy of participants’ socio-economic status (SES). This information was provided by each parent or caregiver by selecting one of six possible alternatives in line with the current educational system in Spain: *sense escolaritzar/sin escolarizar* [no education], *educació primària/educación primaria* [primary school], *educació secundària/educación secundaria* [secondary school], *batxillerat/bachillerato* [complementary studies/high school], *cicles formatius/ciclos formativos* [vocational training], and *educació universitària/educación universitaria* [university degree]. Most families reported university studies (356, 82%), followed by families where the highest educational attainment were vocational studies (59, 14%), complementary studies (6, 1%), secondary education (8, 2%), no formal education (2, <1%) and primary education (1, <1%).

Data analysis

We collected 1,590 items responses. We restricted the analyses to responses to nouns (628 items corresponding to other grammatical classes were excluded, Fourtassi et al., 2020). We then excluded items with missing lexical frequency scores ($n = 269$), items that included more than one lemma (e.g., *mono/mico* [monkey], $n = 48$), multi-word items or phrases (e.g., *barrita de cereales* [cereal bar], $n = 9$). Finally, we removed items without a translation in the other language ($n = 32$). This resulted in a final list of 604 items, corresponding to

words 302 Catalan words and their 302 Spanish translations (302 translation equivalents). After collecting participants' responses, the final dataset consisted of 138,078 observations, each corresponding to a single response of one participant to one item. Each translation equivalent received a median of 234 responses ($Min = 106$, $Max = 872$) from participants, both languages pooled together.

We modelled the probability of participants answering each response category (*No* < *Understands* < *Understands and Says*) using a Bayesian, multilevel ordinal regression model. This model allowed us to estimate both item and participant word-acquisition trajectories, while estimating the effect of our variables of interest. We added *Age* (number of months elapsed between participants' birth date and questionnaire completion), *Length* (number of phonemes in the X-SAMPA phonological transcription of the word-form), *Exposure* (composite measure of Zipf-transformed lexical frequency and language degree of exposure), and *Cognateness* (a measure of cognateness, defined as the phonological similarity between translation equivalents) as population-level effects, together with their two- and three-way interactions. Predictors were standardised before entering the model by subtracting the mean of the predictor from each value and dividing the result by the standard deviation of the predictor. Participant-level and item-level random intercepts and slopes were included where appropriate, according to the structure of the data see 1. We specified a weakly informative prior around the parameters of the model (see Appendix C for details).

Response (k) to word i by participant j

$$\text{Response}_{ij} \sim \text{Cumulative logit}(\theta_{k_{ij}}),$$

where $k \in \{\text{No} \rightarrow \text{Understands}, \text{Understands} \rightarrow \text{Understands and Says}\}$

Distribution parameters

$$\begin{aligned} \theta_{k_{ij}} = & (\beta_{0_k} + u_{0_{i_k}} + w_{0_{j_k}}) + (\beta_1 + u_{1_i} + w_{1_j}) \cdot \text{Age}_i + \\ & (\beta_2 + u_{2_i} + w_{2_j}) \cdot \text{Length}_{ij} + (\beta_3 + u_{3_i} + w_{3_j}) \cdot \text{Exposure}_{ij} + \\ & (\beta_4 + u_{4_i}) \cdot \text{Cognateness}_{ij} + (\beta_5 + u_{5_i} + w_{3_j}) \cdot (\text{Age}_i \times \text{Exposure}_{ij}) + \\ & (\beta_6 + u_{6_i}) \cdot (\text{Age}_i \times \text{Cognateness}_{ij}) + \\ & (\beta_7 + u_{7_i}) \cdot (\text{Exposure}_{ij} \times \text{Cognateness}_{ij}) \\ & (\beta_8 + u_{8_i}) \cdot (\text{Age}_i \times \text{Exposure}_{ij} \times \text{Cognateness}_{ij}) \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Prior

$$\beta_{0_k} \sim \mathcal{N}(-0.25, 0.5); \beta_{1-5} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$$

$$\sigma_{u_{0-8}, w_{0-3}} \sim \mathcal{N}_+(1, 0.25); \rho_{u_{0-8}, w_{0-3}} \sim \text{LKJcorr}(2)$$

We assessed the practical relevance of the estimated regression coefficients of the model following Kruschke and Liddell (2018). First, we specified a region of practical equivalence (ROPE) from -2.5% to +2.5%, in the probability scale. This region indicates the range of values that we considered equivalent to zero. The degree of overlap between the posterior distribution of a regression coefficient with the can be interpreted as support for the true parameter of the coefficient being zero or equivalent. We then computed the 95% highest density interval (HDI) of the posterior distribution of each regression coefficient. This interval contains the true value of this coefficient with 95% probability, given the data. Finally, we calculated the proportion of posterior samples in the 95% HDI that fell into the ROPE, which indicates the probability that the true value of the regression coefficient falls into the ROPE, and should therefore be considered equivalent to zero. For example, a 90% overlap between the HDI of a coefficient's posterior distribution and the indicates that, given

our data, there is a 90% probability that the true value of the coefficient falls within the ROPE, and is therefore equivalent to zero.

Data processing and visualisation was done in R (R Core Team, 2013, version 4.2.2) using the Tidyverse family of packages (Wickham et al., 2019). We implemented the model using was done using the `brms` (Bürkner, 2017), a R interface to the Stan probabilistic language [Carpenter et al. (2017); 2.32.1]. We ran four MCMC chains with 1,000 iterations each and an additional 1,000 warm-up iterations per chain. Model posterior draws and predictions were handled using the `tidybayes` (Kay, 2021) and `marginaleffects` (Arel-Bundock, 2022) R packages.

Results

All parameters in the model showed adequate MCMC convergence diagnostics and little evidence of multicollinearity (see Appendix D for details). Table 3 shows the summary of the posterior distribution of the fixed regression coefficients, and their degree of overlap with the ROPE. For interpretability, we report the estimated regression coefficients transformed to the probability scale. The resulting values correspond to the maximum difference in probability of acquisition (*Comprehension* or *Comprehension and Production*) that corresponds to a one standard deviation change in each predictor¹.

Table 3: Posterior distribution of regression coefficients.

| | Median | 95% HDI | $p(H_0)$ |
|---------------------------|--------|---------|----------|
| Intercepts (at 22 months) | | | |

¹The logit and probability scales relate non-linearly. This means that one logit difference is not necessarily translated to a unique value in the probability scale. For example, the probability of acquisition of a given word might increase in 5% when age increases from 22 to 23 months, the probability of acquisition of the same word might only increase in 0.2% when age increases from 31 to 32 months. The linear growth of the probability of acquisition differs along the logistic curve, and therefore deciding the age point at which to report the estimates of the regression coefficients in the probability scale is not trivial. Following Gelman et al. (2020), we report the maximum value of such coefficient, which corresponds to the linear growth (i.e. derivative) of the logistic curve at the age at which most participants were acquiring a given word. This value can be approximated by dividing the coefficient in the logit scale by four: $\hat{\beta}_j/4$, where $\hat{\beta}_j$ is the estimated mean of the posterior distribution of coefficient j .

| | | | |
|--|--------|------------------|---------|
| Comprehension and Production | 0.438 | [0.379, 0.496] | 8.842% |
| Comprehension | 0.936 | [0.920, 0.949] | 0.000% |
| Slopes | | | |
| Age (+1 SD, 4.87, months) | 0.405 | [0.357, 0.451] | 0.000% |
| Exposure (+1 SD, 1.81) | 0.233 | [0.201, 0.268] | 0.000% |
| Cognateness (+1 SD, 0.26) | 0.058 | [0.014, 0.104] | 3.711% |
| Length (+1 SD, 1.56 phonemes) | -0.062 | [-0.086, -0.036] | 0.000% |
| Age \times Exposure | 0.071 | [0.039, 0.104] | 0.000% |
| Age \times Cognateness | 0.014 | [0.000, 0.026] | 98.474% |
| Exposure \times Cognateness | -0.057 | [-0.069, -0.046] | 0.000% |
| Age \times Exposure \times Cognateness | -0.018 | [-0.027, -0.010] | 97.474% |

The main effect of Age showed the strongest association with the probability of acquisition ($\beta = 0.4$, 95% HDI = [0.36, 0.45]), with all of its posterior samples falling out of the ROPE. A one-month increment in age increased a maximum of 0.08 the probability of acquisition. Similarly, the word exposure index (Exposure) had a strong effect on the probability of acquisition ($\beta = 0.23$, 95% HDI = [0.2, 0.27]). All of the posterior samples of this regression coefficient excluded the ROPE. The impact of this predictor on the probability of acquisition was positive: for every standard deviation increase in exposure, the participant was 0.13 more likely to acquire it. Word-form length also showed a significant association with probability of acquisition ($\beta = -0.06$, 95% HDI = [-0.09, -0.04]). For every phoneme in the word-form, participants were -0.04 less likely to know it. The 95% HDI of the regression coefficient of the Age \times Exposure interaction also excluded the ROPE ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% HDI = [0.04, 0.1]), showing that the effect of the word exposure index differed across ages: older children were more sensitive likely to acquire words with higher exposure rate than younger children.

The posterior distribution of the main effect of cognateness excluded the ROPE completely ($\beta = 0.06$, 95% HDI = [0.01, 0.1]). For every 10% increment in cognateness, the acquisition of a word increased in 0.01. The effect of Cognateness interacted with that

of Exposure: the 95% HDI of the regression coefficient of interaction excluded the ROPE entirely ($\beta = -0.06$, 95% HDI = $[-0.07, -0.05]$), suggesting that the effect of cognateness on a word’s probability of acquisition changed depending on participants’ exposure to word. Follow-up analyses on this interaction showed that when exposure rate was low (e.g., -1 SD), cognateness increased the probability of acquisition substantially. This effect was negligible when for words with median or high exposure (+1 SD) (see Figure 1).

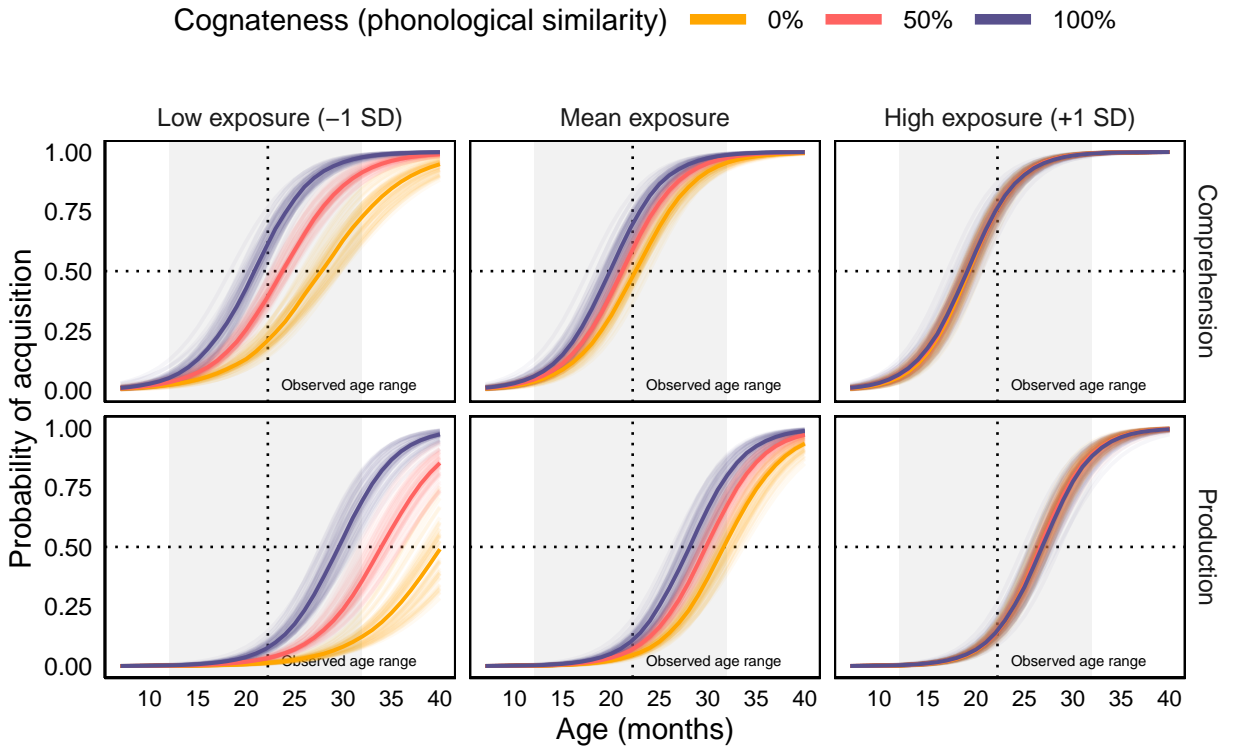


Figure 1: Posterior marginal effects. Thin lines correspond to 50 mean predictions. Thicker lines indicate the median of those predictions. Different colours indicate different levels of cognateness (phonological similarity). Predictions are presented separately for different degrees of word exposure index: little exposure to the word, mean exposure, and high exposure. Predictions for Comprehension are shown on top and predictions for Comprehension and Production are shown on the bottom. In-sample predictions lie inside the grey rectangles.

To rule out the possibility that cognateness facilitation effect we found was due to cognateness comprising more frequent syllables than non-cognates—and therefore not because of their cognate status itself—we compared the syllabic frequency of cognates and non-cognates included in our analyses. To calculate syllable frequency, we first extracted all syllables embedded in the selected words. For each syllable, we summed the lexical frequency

of all the words in which such syllable appeared. The resulting value provided an estimate of the number of times the syllable appears in child-directed speech, embedded within different words. Finally, for each word, we summed the frequency of its syllables, as an estimate of the syllabic frequency of the word. We fit a Bayesian model with cognateness (Levenshtein similarity) as response variable, and the main effects of syllable frequency and number of syllables (to control for the fact words with more syllables are more likely to score higher in syllabic frequency) as predictors. This model provided strong evidence for the association between cognateness and syllabic frequency being equivalent to zero (see Appendix E).

Discussion

This study investigated the impact of cognateness on the early bilingual lexicon. We used Bayesian Item Response Theory to model the acquisition trajectories of a large sample of Catalan and Spanish words, estimating the effect of cognateness on the probability of acquisition. This model corrected for participants' age, word-form length (number of phonemes), and a novel measure of participants' exposure rate to each word. Exposure rates were calculated as a language exposure-weighted lexical frequency score in which each word-form's lexical frequency was corrected by the degree to which the participant was exposed to each language. Overall, we found that cognates (i.e., phonologically similar translation equivalents) were acquired earlier than non-cognates. This effect was mediated by exposure rate: low-exposure word-forms benefited from their cognate status, whereas high-exposure word-forms did not. Capitalising on accumulator models of language acquisition, we provided a theoretical account of bilingual lexical acquisition. In this account, parallel activation of the two languages plays a central role during the consolidation of early representations in the bilingual lexicon, and in which the dynamics of co-activation between translation equivalents results in an earlier age-of-acquisition.

This investigation is particularly relevant in the light of two previous findings. First, Floccia et al. (2018) reported that bilingual toddlers learning two typologically close languages (e.g. shared many cognates, like., English-German) showed larger vocabulary sizes than those learning typologically distant languages (e.g. shared fewer cognates, like English-Mandarin). Second, Mitchell et al. (2022) found an earlier age-of-acquisition for cognates,

compared to non-cognates. The outcomes of both studies pointed to cognateness facilitating word acquisition through parallel activation. But the underpinnings of such effect were unclear: while parallel activation has been extensively described in experimental studies, current paradigms of bilingual word acquisition and word learning are, to a large extent, dissociated from the mechanisms proposed by previous work on word processing. Accumulator models of language acquisition provide a convenient theoretical framework to narrow this gap.

We suggest that parallel activation increases the rate at which bilingual children encounter learning instances for cognate words, but not for non-cognate words. We hypothesised that when a bilingual child is exposed to a word-form in presence of its referent, they activate not only its corresponding lexical representation, but also the lexical representation of its translation. This cross-language activation occurs at the phonological level, and the amount of co-activation that spreads from the spoken word to its translation is proportional to the amount of phonological similarity between both word-forms. Cognates would receive more activation from their translation than non-cognates, leading children to accumulate learning instances with cognate words at a faster rate than with non-cognate words. As a result, lexical representations of cognate words would consolidate at earlier ages than those of non-cognate words.

This account is in line with accumulator models of language acquisition.

This account of bilingual lexical acquisition addresses a critical subject in bilingualism research: do bilingual infants accumulate learning experiences in both languages independently, or does exposure to one language impact the acquisition trajectory of the other language? In the context of lexical acquisition, the former scenario predicts that every learning instance for a given word-form contributes to the consolidation of the representation of such word in the lexicon, while the consolidation of its translation remains unaffected by such experience. In the latter scenario, a learning instance to the same word-form would contribute not only to the consolidation of the representation of such word, but also, to some extent, to the consolidation of its translation. Our findings provide strong support for an account of bilingual vocabulary growth in which the experience and learning outcomes accumulated by the child in one language impact those in the other language. Such a fa-

cilitatory cross-language mechanism might be an important piece in the puzzle of bilingual language acquisition. In particular, it may shed some light on why bilingual infants do not show relevant delays in language acquisition milestones compared to their monolingual peers, while receiving a reduced quantity of speech input in each of their languages. Our results provide some insights into this issue: infants benefited more strongly from the cognateness facilitation effect when acquiring words from the language of lower exposure than in the language of higher exposure.

We suggest that this asymmetry is the result of children's unbalanced exposure to their languages. A bilingual child's frequency of exposure to a given word-form is mostly determined by two factors: the word-form's lexical frequency and the child's amount of language exposure to the language such word belongs to. A dual linguistic input means lower exposure to each of the languages, unless one makes the—arguably implausible—assumption that bilinguals are exposed on average to twice the amount of linguistic input than monolinguals. Because of this difference in exposure, words lower-exposure language might receive activation from their translation in the higher-exposure language more often than words from the higher-exposure language receive activation from their translation in the lower-exposure language. As a result, the cognateness facilitation effect should be stronger in words from the lower-exposure language.

This mechanism might be extended to provide a plausible explanation for the language similarity facilitation reported by Floccia et al. The authors observed a facilitation in the additional (non-English) language: children learning two typologically close languages knew more words in the additional language than those learning two typologically more distant languages. In their sample, the additional language was consistently also the lower-exposure language for most children, while English was the higher-exposure language. Given that words in English were more likely to be acquired first, higher phonological overlap for words in the language of lower exposure (especially those of lower lexical frequency) would facilitate vocabulary growth for languages sharing more cognates with English.

It might be argued that our results reflect the fact that cognate translation equivalents are represented in the initial bilingual lexicon as the *same* lexical entry. Because cognates correspond to similar sounding word-forms in equivalent referential contexts (e.g., hearing

/ˈgat}/ and /ˈga.to}/ in the presence of a cat), it is possible that they classify both as acceptable variations of the same word, therefore treating them as a single lexical item. This would lead to a faster increase in cumulative learning instances, and to earlier ages of acquisition for cognate translation equivalents (for which listening to each word-form contributes to the acquisition of its shared representation), compared to non-cognates (for which listening to each word-form contributes to the acquisition of a separate representation). This mechanism could potentially explain the earlier age-of-acquisition effect of cognates found in the present study, without the need of parallel activation playing any relevant role. Mitchell et al. (2022) discuss this possibility as a possible explanation of the cognate facilitation effect, in which bilinguals only need to map one word-form to the referent in the case of cognates, while mapping two distinct word-forms in the case of non-cognates. Previous work on mispronunciation perception and minimal pair learning points in a different direction. Bilingual toddlers show monolingual-level sensitivity slight phonetic changes in a word-form, according to their performance in word recognition tasks (Bailey & Plunkett, 2002; Mani & Plunkett, 2011; Ramon-Casas & Bosch, 2010; Ramon-Casas et al., 2009, 2017; Swingley, 2005; Swingley & Aslin, 2000; Tamási et al., 2017; Wewalaarachchi et al., 2017). These fine abilities to differentiate between similar-sounding word-forms are reflected in word learning, as bilinguals seem to be able to map minimal pairs to distinct referents (Havy et al., 2016; Mattock et al., 2010; Ramon-Casas et al., 2017). Overall, it seems that bilinguals consider small differences in the phonological forms of words as relevant at the lexical level. We argue that this shows evidence that bilingual toddlers likely form distinct lexical representations for even near-identical cognates.

Our study shares similar methodological limitations with previous work using vocabulary reports provided by caregivers. Such reports can be subject to measurement error induced by caregivers who may sometimes overestimate or underestimate participants' true probability of acquisition of words (e.g., Houston-Price et al., 2007). For instance, although in the present study caregivers were explicitly instructed *not* to rely on their responses to Catalan words when responding to Spanish (and vice versa), it is possible that some caregivers assumed—at least to some extent—that because the child knew a word in one language, the child should also know the word in the other language. This bias would es-

pecially affect similar-sounding words, i.e., cognates. Production estimates may be more prompt to such biases, in part because of the slower pace at which their articulatory abilities develop, compared to their word recognition abilities. For instance, even at 47 months of age, few (typically developing) English monolinguals reach 100% intelligibility scores in word production, as rated by English native adults (Hustad et al., 2020, 2021). This gap between comprehension and production is even larger in the less dominant language of bilingual children (Giguere & Hoff, 2022). For this reason, caregivers may be more uncertain about what words can be counted as *acquired* in this modality. Despite these potential biases, vocabulary checklist filled by parents show strong evidence of concurrent validity with other estimates of vocabulary size or lexical processing (Feldman et al., 2005; Gillen et al., 2021; Killing & Bishop, 2008; but see Houston-Price et al., 2007).

The present study contributes a specific data point into the complex landscape of bilingualism research. Bilinguals are a remarkably heterogeneous population that can hardly be satisfactorily characterised in a comprehensive way (Sebastian-Galles & Santolin, 2020). Bilinguals differ across multiple dimensions. These differences span from exclusively linguistic factors such as the amount of overlap between the phonemic inventories of the two languages being learned (e.g., low, like the case of English and Mandarin, or high like the case of Spanish and Greek), to higher-level factors like the socio-linguistic situation in which the two languages co-exist (e.g., in some regions both languages are co-official and used in similar contexts, while in others, one of the languages hardly has any societal presence, i.e., heritage languages). This diversity of situations in which bilingual toddlers acquire language calls for special consideration of the generalisability of results in bilingualism research. Our sample, although homogeneous (e.g., similar parental educational level across), represents a fairly particular population of bilinguals: the languages involved in the present investigation, Catalan and Spanish, co-exist in Catalonia as official languages, both languages are used in fairly similar contexts, and both languages are known by the majority of the population. In 2018, more than 81.2% of a representative sample of 8,780 adults aged 15 years or older living in Catalonia reported being able to speak Catalan, and more than 99.5% of the same population reported being able to speak Spanish (*Els usos lingüístics de la població de Catalunya*, 2018). In addition, and as commented in the introduction, Catalan and Spanish

are both Romance languages and share a considerable amount of cognates. Extending our analyses to other bilingual populations learning typologically more distant languages, and whose languages tend to be used in more distinct contexts (e.g., heritage languages) should be a natural future step for the present investigation.

In summary, our study provided novel insights about word acquisition in bilingual contexts, and how the presence of cognates in the children's linguistic input impacts the early formation of the lexicon. We found that during the acquisition of low frequency words, bilingual children seem to benefit more strongly from the word's phonological similarity with its translation in the other language. Capitalising on accumulator models of language acquisition we, put forward a theoretical account of bilingual word learning, in which cognateness interacts with lexical frequency and language exposure to boost the acquisition of translation equivalents.

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